

FFWPU Europe and the Middle East: Japan - Serious Violations Of Religious Freedom

Knut Holdhus
February 5, 2024



Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett

Dr. Cole Durham

Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett and Dr. Cole Durham at the special luncheon 31st January, that was part of the 4th International Religious Freedom Summit.

Panel of religious freedom champions point out serious violations in Japan



Katrina Lantos Swett speaking at the special luncheon 31st Jan. 2024 that was part of the 4th International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington DC. From left: Suzan Johnson Cook, Massimo Introvigne, Jan Figel, Cole Durham, Katrina Lantos Swett, Charles Hurt (moderator)

Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, former chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, currently President of the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice, commented 31st January 2024 on the current witch hunt against the [Family Federation](#) in Japan. She spoke at a special luncheon that was part of the 4th International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington DC and said,

"I'm going to talk about what Japan is doing at a more visceral level. You all remember the expression "Friends don't let friends drive drunk." Right now, Japan is in the process of getting into the car drunk when it comes to their treatment of the community, we are here to recognize and honor today.

It is not OK to engage in collective punishment.

It is not OK to target a particular faith community.

It is not OK to use the instrumentalities of power and the instrumentalities of a press that is engaging in a pattern of defamatory and slanderous coverage to marginalize and to make an easy picking for state abuse.



Newt Gingrich at the special luncheon 31st Jan. 2024 at the 4th International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington DC

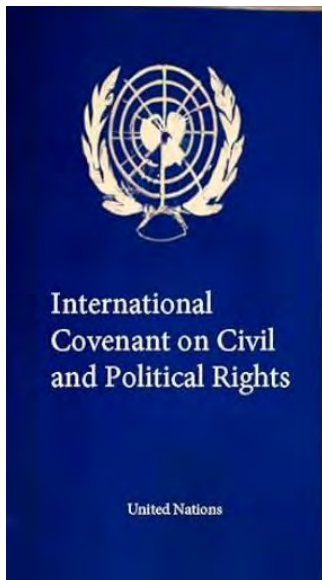
I overheard the comments in the wonderful video of Speaker Gingrich when he talked about Japan for a long time being a beacon of democracy and human rights in a part of the world where that has not always been the case. Read the [speech of Newt Gingrich](#).

We honor that. We respect that Japan is a friend, but friends don't let friends drive drunk. That's what they're starting to do."

Another champion of religious freedom on the panel was Cole Durham, Professor Emeritus at Brigham Young University Law School in Provo, Utah, USA. He commented on the extreme measures taken by the Japanese authorities against the [Family Federation](#) in Japan after the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe 8th July 2022,

"Many of the other people that you've listened to are talking more about the specifics of what's going on with the [Family Federation](#). But let me give you in a very short form, the big picture of how religious freedom applies in this context.

I've been working over the past 30 years in academic settings, but also in international and national legal context. I've been actively involved in affirming the right to legal entity status. I often tell my students this is something that no TV shows are ever made about. It's not romantic, but it's existential and literally for religious communities.



So, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and belief is anchored, as we all know, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The right to freedom in the internal forum that is just what we believe, is absolute and is not subject to being restricted.

But it's well known that the right to manifest or exercise religion or belief can be limited, but only on carefully restricted conditions, including compliance with the rule of law, non-discrimination, and assurance that any limitations are strictly proportional and necessary. [...]

But we tend to think of freedom of religion or belief as a matter of individual rights, which it surely is. But by its nature, religion almost always has a communal dimension. Individual belief would be largely empty if deprived of its communal roots, and of the ability of religious communities to give content, structure and a protective home to individual belief.

Religious communities and structures, and to date in history, states as we now know them, arise in context, which are antedated by prior religious communities and religious commitments.

The specific structures of religion and state relations are heavily dependent on history, but it's now well settled as a matter of international law that freedom of religion or belief necessarily entails the right of religious communities to autonomy in their own affairs.

All major legal sources recognize that the autonomous existence of religious or belief communities is indispensable for pluralism in a democratic society.

In modern legal settings, this includes the right to legal entity status, legal systems that grant benefits such as tax-exempt status. Refusal to grant the requisite status, and comparable benefits constitutes impermissible religious discrimination. [...]

In modern societies, it's not practical to function without legal entities, and if there is wrongful conduct, the individual perpetrators should be sanctioned.

But an entire religious community should not be shut down or crippled, denying the benefits of the religion to all its believers just because of some individual cases of malfeasance, especially where the community itself, as you've seen, has taken affirmative action and effective steps for any problem."



Suzan Johnson Cook in July 2023

Suzan Johnson Cook briefly mentioned an op-ed piece that she wrote together with Katrina Lantos Swett. It was published by RealClearPolitics [independent, non-partisan American media company], but they wanted to "get the mainstream media to focus attention on it, which brings attention to government." [Read about it.](#)

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Some of the speakers at the special luncheon on 31st Jan. 2024 at the International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington DC. Photo: Screenshot from live transmission.

Extract from a special pre-recorded message presented 31st January at the International Religious Freedom Summit 2024 in Washington DC, by senior American politician Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the US House of Representatives. He delivered his presentation during a conference luncheon sponsored by The Washington Times Foundation and the Universal Peace Federation on the last day of the summit.

I can't tell you how important I think it is that we recognize the threat all around the world to religious liberty as we see people killed in places, in Africa, in India, as we see repression in China. But particularly today, this special luncheon helping Japan overcome its religious freedom crisis is very timely and very important.

I've been working a great deal on the issue of what's happening in Japan, and it's really very shocking and very surprising. The Japanese had had a long tradition since World War II of honoring religious liberty, of enforcing the rule of law, and of respecting the conscience of individuals.

And yet now there's a real effort to dissolve the **Family Federation** [...] The government now has spent over a year in deep investigations, and after that year of investigations, they've **not found a single crime that justifies going after the Family Federation**.

But the political pressures and the dishonesty of the Communist Party of Japan and the dishonesty of the lawyers who **made a living out of some 20 years of attacking the Unification Church**, and then the **Family Federation**, all of those risk overriding the rule of law.



Prime Minister Fumio Kishida swayed by communist campaign. Here, 16th April 2023. Photo: 首相官邸ホームページ / Wikimedia Commons. License: CC Attr 4.0 Int

When the Prime Minister announced on 18th October 2022 that the **Unification Church** could not be dissolved because there's no breaking of a criminal law, I sort of began to relax. Yet the very next day, he said maybe we can use civil settlement cases to try to dissolve them.

Now, there's no provision for civil settlement to be a cause for dissolving. It has to be criminal. And the Prime Minister himself has admitted that there is no such criminal case.

My team did a lot of research on this, and we take it very seriously. As many of you know, my wife

Callista was ambassador to the Vatican. She's taken on religious liberty around the world as one of her major projects.

What we discovered was that the **dissolution effort was really started by the Japanese Communist Party**, which as early as 1978 began attacking the **Unification Church** because the **Church's God-affirming message** was directly contrary to the atheistic beliefs of the **Japanese Communist Party** to end free speech and to end freedom of religion.

Unfortunately, some elements of the media have joined in and at times have been I think very, very biased, something we also understand here in the United States.

But there was a



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Featured image above: Left: USCIRF Chair Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett in Oslo 8th Nov. 2014. Photo: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped. Right: Suzan Johnson Cook in July 2023. Photo: [FOREF](#)

RealClearPolitics [independent, non-partisan American media company] that Ambassador Suzan Johnson Cook and Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett wrote that explains that this is a very alarming moment for all of us who believe in religious liberty, because Japan is one of our greatest allies. ([More on their article.](#))

It's been a bulwark in the Far East of standing for freedom, for the rule of law, and for constitutional behavior. And that's why I think so many of us are now engaged in real concern for the future of Japan.

Everything that Callista and I have done, working with the [Family Federation](#) and its various associates, working with the *Universal Peace Federation* and working with *The Washington Times*, have been aimed at promoting the value of faith for all communities.

I've been astonished to be in meetings where literally people from over 100 countries representing virtually every religion on the planet come together peacefully to share their mutual right to approach [God](#) on their own terms. I believe this is central to the whole cause of freedom, the core value of being able to approach [God](#) without interference, it really underlies all freedom.

A government which can block you from approaching [God](#) can block you from anything.

I'm calling
on



Rashad Hussain 15th May 2023. Photo: Chuck Kennedy / U.S. Department of State / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped

ambassador Rashad Hussein, the IRF ambassador at large, to continue the good attention he's already given this issue to alert Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and to shine a very bright light on Japan.

We have to make sure that the Japanese government understands that this is a key test of the future of Japan, a key test of the future of religious liberty.

And that to close down an organization as a deliberately political act of retribution is a profound undermining of the very basis of freedom.

And I so much appreciate all of you being involved in this important 'cause.

Featured image above: Newt Gingrich at the special luncheon 31st Jan. 2024 at the 4th International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington DC. Photo: Screenshot from live transmission.

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Japan Copying Totalitarian Regimes

September 30, 2023 Knut Holdhus



Katrina Lantos Swett



Suzan Johnson Cook

Religious freedom authorities warn Kishida not to follow path of totalitarian regimes

The independent, non-partisan media company RealClearPolitics published 26th September 2023 a commentary headlined “Democracies in Asia Risk Failing on Religious Freedom”. It was penned by two religious freedom authorities – Suzan Johnson Cook, who served as the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom from 2011 to 2013, and Katrina Lantos Swett, former chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).



The two point out that the oppression has become so extreme that we no longer are shocked by the horrible treatment of religious minorities in totalitarian regimes like China, Iran, and Myanmar. What is even more disturbing is however the growing acceptance of persecution in democratic countries.

In the article, they warn that some democracies in



Asia, such as India, Pakistan, and Japan, are failing to protect religious freedom and are allowing or even encouraging discrimination and persecution of minority faith groups.

Johnson Cook and Swett describe how the Indian government has supported “policies that discriminate against and hinder the freedom of religious minorities, such as Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindu Dalit communities.” Those policies have caused violent mob attacks against minority religions.



Students and teachers at Ahmadiyya institute in Bangladesh in 2011. Photo: Lrtaher / Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC ASA 4.0 Int](#). Cropped

Also in neighbouring Pakistan you find state-supported persecution leading to mob attacks against minority faiths like Christians and Ahmadiyya Muslims.

What is more surprising to the two former U.S. state officials, is the situation in Japan, a country that in many ways for a long time has been an exemplary democratic nation where the population are guaranteed civil and political rights. The writers explain,

“In a move that is much more reminiscent of current practices in China and Russia, Japan’s government is now threatening to dissolve a legally constituted religious group for seemingly political reasons.

Scholars of religion and human rights have watched with concern the developments in Japan following the tragic assassination in 2022 of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The assassin claimed the attack was motivated by his anger at the [Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#) (formerly the [Unification Church](#)), to which his mother belongs and which had ties, through politics, to Abe.”

The commentary in RealClearPolitics compares the development in Japan since the Abe assassination to the situation in totalitarian states, where religious minorities have been eliminated after campaigns where the authorities used the media to paint a black picture of particular faith groups.

Although the Kishida administration did not orchestrate such a campaign, they seem to have joined it and come to accept its claims and goals.

Johnson Cook and Swett write,

“Dissolving a religious organization that has not been found guilty of any crime would taint the image of Japan as a country committed to democratic principles. Democracies must live by their values and can never follow the path of totalitarian regimes [...]”

The two American religious freedom advocates emphasize the vital role of freedom of religion or belief for protecting faiths that are often misunderstood and portrayed in a negative manner. Every democracy has the duty to guard the rights of minorities to practice their faith, whether it be the Ahmadiyyas in Pakistan, Christians in India or a relatively new religious movement like the [Family Federation](#) in Japan.

Swett and Johnson Cook point out,

“Governments that truly embrace freedom of religion or belief safeguard their religious communities against the tides of negative public opinion and against prejudice. Laws, policies, or actions that disregard or trample on this fundamental right have no place in democratic nations.”

U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain is encouraged by Johnson Cook and Swett to “speak out boldly” to stop the ongoing attacks on freedom of religion and belief in democratic nations. If such an essential human right is disregarded there, dictators around the world have the perfect excuse to do the same. The world’s democracies must stand up for freedom of religion and belief.

Featured image above: Left: USCIRF Chair Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett in Oslo 8th Nov. 2014. Photo: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped. Right: Suzan Johnson Cook in July 2023. Photo: [FOREF](#)

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Toru Goto, member of the [Family Federation](#) in Japan, who got his life destroyed by criminal persecutors who held him captive for more than 12 years in order to break his faith. Photo (2022): Graeme Carmichael



Rashad Hussain 15th May 2023. Photo: Chuck Kennedy / U.S. Department of State / Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain](#) image. Cropped



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